

SUBJECT: Points Paper on Laos

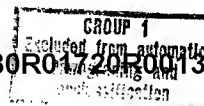
1. Laos and its political problems.

Laos is a new nation born of the dissolution of French colonial power; one of three countries which formerly made up French Indo-China. Its population is small, less than three million people, and its resources are limited. Its boundaries to the north flank Communist China; to the east, North Vietnam and part of South Vietnam; and to the south, Cambodia and Thailand. Although its territorial integrity was guaranteed by the Geneva Agreements of 1954, the North Vietnamese have consistently violated Laotian borders and attempted to subvert its government.

The leaders of today's Laos were once united in their opposition to the French and the Japanese. As the Japanese Empire disintegrated in August 1945, a "Free Lao" movement began. The movement was nationalistic and idealistic and drew young Lao activists to its standard. When the French recognized a limited autonomy for Laos within the French Union in 1949, this unity dissolved. A small communist element of the "Free Lao" deserted the new government and slipped into North Vietnam. This became the nucleus of the Communist Party of Laos which is the Lao People's Party. The military arm of the Lao People's Party is called the Pathet Lao. This party was organized and supported by the North Vietnamese from its inception. The North Vietnamese hoped to destroy the Royal Laotian Government using the Lao People's Party, a political front organization, and the Pathet Lao. These organizations, however, have never gained widespread popular support.

Between 1954 and 1961, the Royal Government tried many times to reach an agreement with the communists for their participation in the government and for the incorporation of the Pathet Lao into the National Army.

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No agreement, however, was reached and by 1960 the communist insurgency threatened the existence of the fragile Laotian Government. A cease fire was arranged in mid-1961. After strenuous diplomatic efforts by our government and many others, new accords were signed at Geneva in July 1962. These new agreements neutralized Laos. All signatory countries, including the North Vietnamese, pledged to withdraw their military forces and advisors from Laos. We complied. The North Vietnamese did not. The International Control Commission (ICC), an agency established in 1954 to supervise the execution of the first Geneva agreements, was continued in its function and given new authorities. The United States cooperated fully with the ICC which supervised our withdrawal. The communists refused to permit ICC inspection of the areas under their control.

2. The relation between the war in Vietnam and the conflict in Laos.

In 1960 the North Vietnamese Communist party decided to use armed force to overthrow the Government of South Vietnam. They informed the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF) and began to infiltrate arms and war materiel into South Vietnam under the guise of assistance to the NLF. The South Vietnamese fought back and established a defense line of strategic hamlets along the border of the Demilitarized Zone which slowly choked off the communist supply route. The North Vietnamese then turned to Laos to bypass the DMZ and seized the major towns of the eastern Laotian panhandle. Thereafter they built the complex of roads through Laos we call the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Most of the personnel and materiel for the subversion of South Vietnam have passed over these roads. Without them, the North Vietnamese effort to subvert South Vietnam would have ceased in the early 1960's.

3. North Vietnamese goals in Laos.

The North Vietnamese decision to use armed force to subvert South Vietnam had profound effects on the new Laotian

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nation. After 1960 it became clear that the North Vietnamese had two goals in Laos: to secure the Ho Chi Minh Trail as the major supply route to their soldiers in South Vietnam and to weaken and ultimately replace the Royal Laotian Government. These remain the North Vietnamese goals.

4. North Vietnam's primary goal: to guard the supply route to its troops in South Vietnam.

As the North Vietnamese attempt to take over South Vietnam met increasing resistance from the Government of Vietnam and its ally, the United States, the North Vietnamese were forced to allocate more of their soldiers and resources to the subversion of South Vietnam. The increasingly effective allied interdiction of these men and supplies forced the North Vietnamese to rely increasingly on the routes through Laos. To protect our American soldiers in South Vietnam in 1964, it became necessary to use American aircraft to reconnoiter and later bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southeastern Laos. The Royal Laotian Government, moreover, authorized this activity to support its efforts to restore Laotian authority in the Trail area. The North Vietnamese still give greatest priority to the goal of protecting the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Each year, since 1969, the North Vietnamese have stepped up the infiltration of Vietnamese troops into Laos. Today there are over 67,000 North Vietnamese soldiers in Laos. Of these, two-thirds occupy the towns of southeastern Laos guarding the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

5. North Vietnam's second goal: the subversion of the Laotian Government.

In north Laos the failure of the Lao Communists to gain popular support or fight effectively also forced Hanoi to use its own troops to achieve its aims. In the past the North Vietnamese have been restrained in their actual troop commitment in an effort to maintain the fiction that the war in north Laos was being conducted by local Lao

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Communists. In addition, they feared that a blatant commitment of enough forces to overrun north Laos would invoke a major response by the United States or Thailand. With limited forces available to both sides, other factors played an important part in the defense of this area. The climate of Laos is greatly affected by the yearly monsoon. In early June the rains begin and do not stop until late November. The rain is heavy. North Laos, moreover, is extremely mountainous. The roads are primitive and unpaved. During the rainy seasons the roads are impassable. Taking advantage of these natural factors, the Laotian Government employed a classic guerrilla defense giving way to North Vietnamese attacks in the dry season and retaking the lost areas when the rains began again. At the request of the Royal Government, the United States has provided air support for some years for Laotian forces under attack.

Last year the North Vietnamese forces in north Laos moved beyond the areas they had previously occupied and mounted an offensive which threatened the royal capital. As the dry season ended the Laotian Government forces counterattacked, intending to relieve this military pressure. This maneuver, which succeeded beyond expectations, drove the North Vietnamese off the strategic plain in north Laos known as the Plain of Jars. This year, after rebuilding their forces by introducing a new division from Hanoi, re-equipping the one mauled in last year's fighting and introducing tanks and long-range artillery, the North Vietnamese Army has again taken the offensive. They now threaten to overrun all Lao Government forces in north-central Laos.

6. The American position.

The United States desires nothing more in Laos than to see a return to the Geneva Accords and the complete withdrawal of all foreign troops, leaving the Lao to settle their own differences in a peaceful manner.

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It is the North Vietnamese who, in support of their two political goals, have invaded Laos and who have escalated the fighting.

The United States has no ground combat troops in Laos. We have, therefore, suffered no losses of American military personnel from ground combat. We are conducting air operations in Laos for the protection of our forces in South Vietnam and to assist the forces of the Government of Laos to combat a clear case of external aggression.

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